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Chapter VII

DEATH AND ITS ATTENDANT CEREMONIES

761 Death is an event which every Kol knows must be faced relatively early in life. One does not find a high proportion of aged Kols.[1] Among many primitive people death is usually ascribed to evil influences, but among the Kols this does not seem to be the common belief. While they believe that some deaths may be ascribed to evil influences they do not believe that all are caused that way. On the whole they take quite a natural view of the phenomenon. What the gods will that they do. Death also may be due only to natural causes or carelessness and no hidden malevolent cause is assumed. Death is usually deserved, for as one sows he also reaps. Hence an early death may be justly merited and caused by corrupt living. The Kols do not seem to be as superstition ridden as many groups are, yet we found [771] indications that they hold the general local village point of view. On the whole there is a wholesome attitude toward the supernatural—the world is not altogether evil.

763 The Approach of Death. When it is clear that a person is about to die there are certain things which ought to be done. It was found that the custom of bringing a cow to the bedside of the dying man is known and is occasionally practiced. The dying man is asked to take [825 782] hold of her tail. This will help him to get to heaven, for the cow is now considered an offering to God, and it is held that by holding the tail the [771 778] dying man makes this offering. If available, he is also made to drink a little Ganges water which is regarded as the very best of drinks to give him [823] at that hour. Failing this, a sip of water in which gold has been washed is efficacious. Gold is considered an incarnation of God and a symbol of [824] purity. Again, some ordinary water into which some ground up leaves of the *tulasi* plant (*Ocymum sanctum*) have been thrown is advantageous. Such drinks are said to purify the dying person and prepare the soul for its flight to other worlds. Hindu influences are apparent.

Usually the person who is dying is placed on the ground to expire. The body is placed on the ground so that there may be close contact with Mother Earth. In some places it is said that a man may just as well die

[162 171] 1 This holds for primitive tribes in general, although any statement of age is unreliable. The 1931 census figures show that among the Kols there were only 100 men and 99 women per mile over forty. Other tribes show the following: Gond 154 men and 155 women; Maria 106 and 97; Baiga 143 and 148. Hindus rank higher—171 and 173 for Brahmins and 156 and 153 for Kunbis. *Census of India*, 1931, xii: I, p. 131.

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on a bed, if he is on one, as on the ground, but it is mostly affirmed that the ground is the place for the dying person. The body should be put there only when it is certain that the person is about to expire. The place where the body is laid should be first plastered with cow dung if that is possible. The head should be toward the north, that is, pointing towards the sacred Ganges, and the feet to the south, for it is in that direction that the soul has to go to the land of death. Most of the graveyards are to the south of Kol villages.

As soon as it is ascertained that the person is dead the fact of death is publicly proclaimed by loud lamentations set up by members of the family. The lamentations do not seem to be linked up with the frightening away of evil spirits but are essentially a natural expression of grief; although to an outsider they may seem to be overdone. The body should not remain within the house, but should be immediately removed to a place made ready for it on the veranda or the small courtyard in front of the house. There the body is laid upon the ground and is covered with a new white cloth. Nothing is done to the body in the way of measuring its length or the tying of its toes.[1]

PREPARATIONS FOR THE FUNERAL. Immediate preparations are now begun for the funeral, which, under favourable circumstances should be underway within an hour or two. Friends prepare a bamboo sling (*tatari*), made of two long bamboo poles with a few crossbars. On this the body is placed and fastened. A wooden *charpai* (rope cot) may serve just as well, and if the death occurred on one, this is used. Such a *charpai* has to be discarded anyhow, and in this case it is abandoned at the place of disposal. It is, however, immediately taken possession of by a low caste Hindu—a Basor or a Domar.

Occasionally the body is washed with a bit of cold water at the house before being transported to the place of burial or cremation. The most common procedure, though, is that the body is not washed till the funeral grounds are reached.

If the person has died in the evening, too late for immediate disposal, the body may be kept upon the earth outside the house during the whole of the night. Friends and relatives sit round the body which is regarded with awe and sometimes fear. A lamp is kept burning so that no evil spirit may get possession of the corpse and enter it in the darkness. Nevertheless no efforts are made to tie the corpse

[1] As soon as the body is laid out, some non-Kol groups measure its length and tie its big toes together in order to determine whether or not a live spirit has gained entrance to the body during the period between death and its removal to the cemetery. If a spirit has entered, the body will elongate and the thread about the toes will be broken.

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776 1782 Khermai is offered many things: a few annas may be left at the shrine; cocoanuts are a favourite offering; *ghi*, *puris*, *batasa*, and *ganja* are forms of food and drugs which please her and are frequently placed before her shrine. She likes *sendur* marks here and there about the place where she is worshipped, and incense is welcomed. Lemons and limes are always acceptable and should be placed before her. They also prevent the evil spirits from molesting the place.

If the occasion is sufficiently serious, an animal sacrifice is made to Khermai. Apparently no particular colour is required, although [805] in one centre it was said that should a chicken be offered, it should be white. She likes young female animals: pig, kid or lamb. These are later eaten at a ceremonial meal in connection with the shrine.

[778] [624] Khermai is best worshipped under a *nim* tree (*Melia azadirachta*), and her shrine is generally found there. If there is no *nim* tree available, a *pipal* (*Ficus religiosa*) or a *bel* (*Aegle marmelos*) tree will do. She is generally worshipped after sunset, although this is not always the rule, especially if there is an emergency. In summer time when it is hot and dry, some *gharas* of water are kept at the shrine and people frequently pour water over the shrine to cool the *devi*.

If any danger threatens the village or an epidemic is near, some milk, liquor and powdered charcoal may be mixed and sprinkled about the village in her name. This is followed by an animal sacrifice and a ceremonial meal at the shrine. In case of smallpox, in addition to the regular offerings, she may be given a bath each day for ten days. Then a mixture of oil and turmeric powder is poured out before her.

Mahamai. "The Great Mother." This goddess is the same as [753] Sitalamai, the goddess of smallpox and the name is an euphemistic title. Kols are not always clear concerning the relationship of the two and sometimes they have been named together. A red flag indicates the presence of this deity.

[761] *Marhai*. Is said to be the goddess of death, but under this name at least, does not seem to be very important, and no satisfactory information can be given about her by the Kols. She is probably the same as Maridevi.

[753] *Maridevi*. The goddess of epidemics, particularly of cholera and plague. By some informants she is said to be Khermai's elder sister. She is very powerful, and there is no better protector from these diseases than this goddess. In the Kaimur hills one group claimed that she was the most powerful of all the *devis* which they worshipped.

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776 Many of the daily occurrences can be traced to their activity. They are sometimes friendly, but it actually happens that they are more often unfriendly and do their best to injure and annoy human beings. The Kols have mentioned certain kinds of spirits with which they are familiar. A few Kols have claimed actual encounters with them, and yet others were not quite so certain of their existence.

775 761 *The Bhut* is commonly mentioned by the Kol, but the use of the term is frequently in a general sense. Ordinarily this is the spirit of one who has died a sudden or a tragic death. A *bhut* is always of the male gender. The spirit of a man killed by a train is sure to become a wandering *bhut*. So is the spirit of a murdered man, as well as one dying of a dread disease. The general belief is that it will remain in this form for twelve years until released. In a general sense, any man not taken up by Bhagawan after death becomes a wandering *bhut*. [165] Another curious explanation was given. It was claimed that the expectation of life for a Kol is about thirty years, and for this period one must dwell on earth, whether in the body or in the spirit. If a person twenty years of age should die for any reason, his spirit will still have to stay upon the earth for another ten years, and will wander in the form of a *bhut*. A man living past thirty years of age will not become a *bhut* unless he meets a tragic end. The same group also related that during this unexpired period in which the spirit must wander upon the earth, the spirit of a very good man becomes a very evil *bhut*, while the spirit of a very bad man was a friendly and harmless *bhut*!

775 682 The *bhut* of a murdered man is certain to haunt the murderer's family and in the course of time is sure to destroy it. Murder thus means only more trouble and Kols should never resort to it. It is a fact that murders among Kols are very unusual. *Bhuts* as a rule never injure members of their own families and will even help them. Therefore the Kol holds that one should never fear the spirit of a loved one.

775 *Bhuts* and other spirits may enter a room as does the air which comes in everywhere; though the average Kol usually considers that they enter through some larger opening in the house, such as a door [342] or a window. The lack of windows in Kol houses is partly due to this point of view.

The Churel is the spirit of a female who has died in distressing circumstances, especially if the death was caused by child bearing. The *churel* is of dreadful appearance, and her feet, if one would look at them, are turned backwards. She often attempts to seduce men and ruin them. As a rule her front is attractive but she is black and

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A sleeper should never be awakened rudely or directly, for to do so is dangerous to him and may bring a curse upon the person awakening him. If it is found necessary to awaken another person a noise should be made from a distance and should gradually be increased. This gives the soul time to get back. Kols believe that if one dies in his sleep it may be due to the spirit being overcome by a demon and the thin cord connecting the two being broken. A man awakened suddenly may also collapse due to the fact that the one awakening him did so before the spirit had time to return to the body and his connections were cut off.

Dreams are good and bad, not merely in the sense of being pleasant or unpleasant, but their significance is either favourable or unfavourable. It is good to dream of elephants, Kols say, and of meeting relatives. Dances are welcomed as a part of a dream by some Kols, and others do not attach a good significance to them for they believe somewhat in opposites. Weeping, for example, is good for it means that happiness will come, and to dream of copper coins (the cheapest) is a sure sign that one will get silver ones. To dream of a death is also good, for it means that some one who is ill will soon be well. But it is bad to dream of a dead body or of wood or clay, for these things indicate that there will be a death in the family. Happy experiences in dreams may really mean that tragedies are ahead, and so to dream of a wedding or a hearty laugh is not good. While a dream of copper portends riches, to dream of gold or silver or jewels and ornaments, has the opposite significance. To dream of snakes or fish is also a bad omen.

We asked a number of Kols whether they ever dreamed that they were flying, but none ever had.[1] One said that he had often dreamed of riding a bicycle, though in actual life he had never ridden on one. Another Kol, working in a lime kiln, described a dream in which he went to the house of the superintendent of the kilns and when he entered he found everything he had ever wanted to eat all spread out on the table before him. He said that while in his dream it made him happy, he nevertheless knew that it probably meant that he would be hungry before long.

The gods and goddesses often reveal through dreams the kinds of gifts and sacrifices they would like Kols to give to them. If a *devi* should appear in a dream and demand a chicken or another animal, it would be necessary for the person to offer this. Sometimes the *devi* is asked at the shrine to reveal her will to the person in a dream.

1 Elwin records dreams of flying among the Baigas. *Op. Cit.*, p. 413.